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**BOOK REVIEW** Hanna Serkowska, Maciej Ganczar (eds), *Jeszcze raz o starości z chorobą* [On Ageing and Illness, One More Time]. Publisher: Homini (Poland), Krakow 2019, pp. 231.

The book *Jeszcze raz o starości z chorobą* [On Ageing and Illness, One More Time] edited by Hanna Serkowska and Maciej Ganczar, is a compendium of information about dementia and Alzheimer's disease called "the plague of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" which affects the growing number of people around the world. The essays collected in this publication have been written by authors from different countries and research centers. They try to present the issue of social perception of and attitudes towards ageing and AD in different cultural, political, medical and institutional contexts. Some personal experiences and case studies are described too, thanks to which the book is not only a scientific text. It allows the readers to respond emotionally to the stories presented, which is a valuable experience in shaping individual attitudes towards the discussed issues.

The book has 231 pages and is divided into four parts. The first part titled *Starość z demencją* (*Old age with dementia*) consists of three texts by Mark Schweda, Lucy Burke and Esther Jones, which introduce readers to the topic of understanding dementia, ageing and disability syndrome in elderly and the changes regarding this group of patients, which recently take place both in the society and in the medical environment. On the one hand, medicalization and popularization of knowledge enables early diagnosis and distinguishing between Alzheimer's and dementia. On the other hand, adopting purely medical perspective may diminish the role of psychosocial and family resources (which are also important health factors) in the public debate. This part provides also a brief characteristics of the modern political discourses on dementia and AD, enriched by author's personal experiences during work in a nursing home.

The second part is titled *Rozrachunki ze starością* (*Settlements with old age*) and introduces the readers to a very intimate and personal world of experiences of families who struggle with providing care for their dying spouses or parents. It often becomes the critical point not only for the patients but first of all for their caregivers, allowing them to reach to the very depths of their humanity. This section contains a case study of a renown German writer, Walter Jens (Anna Szyndler) and autobiographical texts by Sandor Marai and Henryk Grynberg (Katarzyna Jerzak). Quite depressing reports about gradually lost mental abilities of the main characters and helplessness of their families lead to reflections on death with dignity and, at the same time, emphasize the will to live and enjoy every moment, so natural for every human. The texts show the brutal truth of treating ageing and elderly diseases as "the problem of non-returnable

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allocation of resources” which – with proper research and financing – can be reduced thanks to creating individuals who do not generate any costs, do not require long-term care and do not occupy hospital beds unnecessarily. There is hope, however, despite these negative conclusions. It is the heroic fight of the families who in the face of this suffering are able to go through existential experiences that change them and bring to light the amazing and beautiful power of personal love.

The third part *Starość zinstytucjonalizowana (Institutionalized old age)* begins with the text by Agnieszka Czyżak about the image of nursing homes in the contemporary literature, which is perfectly complemented with the text by Hanna Serkowska who shows the anthropology of nursing homes in foreign and Polish literature. The dark image of the existence of old people with dementia, left to themselves in hospital wards is compared to concentration camps where constant balancing between life and death, existence and non-existence may lead either to total resignation and despair or to ongoing attempts to discover the meaning of one’s existence. Recording personal experiences is for both caregivers and patients a self-therapeutic antidote which helps them distance themselves from the painful circumstances.

The fourth part titled *Starość w literaturze pięknej (Old age in literature)* is the continuation of this narrative direction. The authors (Adriana Taita, Olga Elsbach and Małgorzata Grzegorzewska) present the motives of old age in Victorian novels by Charles Dickens and poetry by T. S. Eliot and Ted and Craig Hughes. Maria Gierlak, in turn, analyses the interesting literary reportages by Arno Gieger and David Sievek-ing who focus in their texts on the “dwindling portraits” of father and mother. This section ends with the text by Katarzyna Szymańska who characterizes the didactic value of Stian Hole’s Gramann trilogy and shows how can ageing be introduced to the youngest readers.

To summarize, what comes to the fore after reading *On Ageing and Illness, One More Time* is the merciless new biopolicy implemented in many countries around the world, which increases the financing of research into dementia and AD and, at the same time, stigmatizes and creates social distance towards sick persons who are considered “unproductive”. This is particularly visible in the dystopian pictures showing lonely and older people used as “guinea pigs” in experiments on new medicines and as “organic banks” of organs. The book provides the accurate diagnosis of changes in the way humanity is understood and defined, especially during illness which deprives individuals of their consciousness and makes them a “burden for their environment”, turns them into “post-persons” and “empty shells” who cease to contribute to the society and generate high costs of care. It is a drastic presentations of ageing, the process which is inevitable, and authors even compare nursing homes to prisons or even “concentration camps”.

Despite the multitude of motives and authors, the book is a coherent treaty defending the subjectivity and dignity of not only patients with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease but all people who are excluded and disabled due to gradual ageing. Using clear

and popular language, the authors show the present state, the risk factors and possible educational and social actions, at the same time acting as the voice of conscience in the society of unbridled consumption and growth. The following words of Inga Jens who was taking care of her husband summarize the whole book very well: “Despite physical and mental degradation, one becomes a human till the end, a person who deserves respect and whose world, even if foreign and incomprehensible for others, is equal to the seemingly “normal” world of healthy people”.